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SUBJECT: POLITICAL PARTIES COMMIT TO TOLERANCE AND NON-VIOLENCE AHEAD
OF 2009 ELECTIONS

REF: DURBAN 69

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: On November 25, 2008, South Africa's
Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) hosted a conference of
political parties where representatives committed their parties
to respect the electoral code of conduct and pledged political
tolerance ahead of 2009 presidential elections. End summary.

Background and Introduction

¶2. (SBU) Over 300 delegates from all political parties
represented in South African national and provincial parliaments
attended the November 25 IEC conference, which discussed the
creation of an environment conducive to free and fair elections
in 2009. The IEC convened this national conference after
incidents of political intolerance and the rise in the use of
inflammatory language by political leaders. In KwaZulu Natal
(KZN), African National Congress (ANC) Provincial Secretary
Senzo Mchunu is reported to have declared the province a "no-go
area" for the new breakaway party, Congress of the People (COPE)
(reftel). Party leaders have raised concerns about the rise of
incidents of political intolerance and violence, especially in
KZN, where COPE meetings in Verulam and Chatsworth were
allegedly disrupted by ANC members. The KZN-based Inkatha
Freedom Party (IFP) also declared that COPE is not the only
party that is experiencing incidents of intolerance at the hands
of the ANC. The IFP reported that its election registration
posters were destroyed in Umzinto and in a November 26 statement
its national chairperson noted that disturbances at IFP public
meetings by ANC supporters were commonplace.

Strong Civil Society Participation

¶3. (SBU) Civil society organizations including faith-based
groups had a robust presence at the conference. The Human Rights
Commission and Commission on Gender Equality also participated.
Rev. Dinis Motsolo, Chairman of the Mozambique Council of
Churches gave a presentation on the Mozambican experience which
created an environment conducive to free and fair elections.
Representatives from the House of Traditional Leaders, National,
Provincial and Local Governments also joined the gathering.

Adherence to Code of Conduct and Rules Governing Elections Urged

¶4. (SBU) The IEC provided copies of the electoral code of
conduct and the electoral act to all delegates. The Chairperson
of the IEC, Ms. Brigalia Bam, spoke at length about the code of
conduct and the electoral act. She emphasized the importance of
political parties' adherence to the code of conduct. Ms. Bam
also encouraged political parties to do more to educate their

members about the code of conduct and the rules governing elections. Ms. Bam indicated that the IEC was concerned about the recent incidents of political intolerance, especially in KZN, and she called upon all political parties to act against members who are perpetuating political intolerance and violence. Ms. Bam cautioned against the use of violent language by politicians and said that this had the potential to inflame violence. She called for an end to the "war-talk" during campaigning.

Atmosphere Calm, Respectful

15. (SBU) No incidents of political intolerance took place at the conference and political leaders present treated each other with respect. Representatives of parties pledged to end incidents of political intolerance. Discussions were well conducted and all parties had an opportunity to engage with the IEC and other stakeholders present. However, vigorous debate among political parties on political intolerance and other related issues did not take place at this conference. Politicians and members of civil society at the conference discussed a number of issues including "the role of civil society in promoting an environment conducive to peaceful, free and fair election and the role of security institutions in assisting to establish an environment conducive to free and fair elections." Opposition party representatives criticized the SABC for giving the ANC more coverage and called on the IEC to organize a meeting between the SABC, IEC and political parties to discuss election campaign coverage by SABC. SABC 2 hosted live coverage of a session where political leaders publicly committed their parties to respect the code of conduct and the electoral act during campaigning and the election itself.

Notable Absences: COPE, Senior Leaders of Other Parties

16. The new breakaway party from the ruling African National Congress (ANC), the Congress of the People (COPE), was not

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officially represented at the conference because the IEC had invited only political parties represented in national parliament and provincial legislatures. Other senior leaders of political parties, such as ANC President Jacob Zuma, Democratic Alliance Leader Hellen Zille and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) President Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi did not attend the conference.

Comment

17. (SBU) Despite the overall success of the conference, the absence of senior political leaders, especially from the ANC, was noteworthy and disappointing. The ANC missed an opportunity for its senior leadership to respond to allegations of political intolerance from opposition parties. All political parties committed themselves to respect the rules of electoral conduct and to ensure political tolerance. However, it remains to be seen whether they will be able to control their more energetic members, especially at the grassroots level. Although KZN is a province with a history of political violence and intolerance, no special focus was paid to discussing the situation in the province, aside from the comments from Ms. Bam (para 4). However, the conference was an important platform for the IEC to set the ground rules and educate both political and civil society organizations on rules governing elections and campaigning. Also, the strong interest in the electoral process displayed by civil society organizations and other sectors like the business and religious community who attended the meeting is good for South Africa's democracy.

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